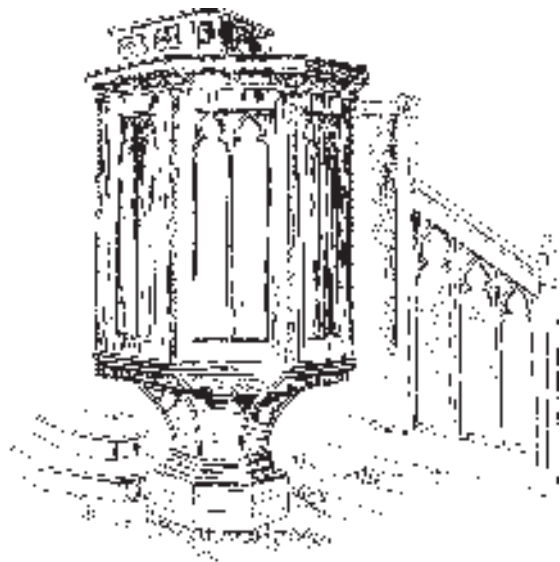


June 21, 2009

# Westminster Presbyterian Church

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## Sermons

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**Wishing or Praying?**  
by The Reverend Kay Davis-Dudding

Romans 8:26-39

Remember Jiminy Cricket—the little guy who tried to keep Pinocchio on the straight and narrow path? He's the one who sang, "*When you wish upon a star, makes no difference who you are; when you wish upon a star your dreams come true.*"

I actually think I used to believe that. In fact, I know I did. I've wished for a lot of things over the years. Some of them have come true, and some are still pending. Do you wish upon a star—hoping your wishes and wants will come true?

What about your prayers? Are they also full of wishes and wants? Can you look back over your years and see the hand of God moving in your life, even in the dark and hurting times? Or does your God only show up and answer the "good" prayers?

During World War II, General Patton told one of his chaplains that people say chaplains have "divine connections," and asked that he pray to God that God stop the "blankety-blank" rain – so he could get his army moving again.

It's an old cliché. People do the same thing to preacher-type folks all the time. We're asked for help with all kinds of things: for getting a hole-in-one, for flowers to bloom, for good grades on a test, for the baby to finally sleep through the night, for good weather for a wedding. And if good weather does prevail, then the clergy person is elevated to a special status.

I officiated at an outdoor wedding a few years ago which had the potential for great beauty. But on the morning of the wedding it was windy – real windy and the possibility existed that the beautiful flowers and decorations would be blown away, and heavy rain was also threatening. The bride and her mother were almost in tears, asking that I pray for the day to clear up. Well, just a couple hours before the wedding, the clouds parted, the wind died down, the sun shown, and it became a beautiful, gorgeous day. I truly don't believe God intervened to make the day turn out so beautifully so the wedding might go off without a hitch; but, the bride and her mother were sure my prayers had a lot to do with it. It was rather flattering to think my prayer held so much power!

But, all of that is wish-upon-a-star religion, or the Aladdin lamp syndrome. Remember Aladdin and the genie? He'd rub the lamp and the genie would pop out, and give him his wish! Some of us treat Jesus as our Genie. You know, rub your Bible and let it fall open to a verse, and hope for some inspiration and direction.

That's maybe one of the most serious problems in the church—we expect God to do our every bidding. “God, give me patience – right now!” The Bible isn't just a book of laws, or philosophical ideas. It isn't just a book of proverbs, or pithy sayings, with the prescription to “take one scripture before each meal.” The heart and soul of the gospel revolves around a Person, and around people. And, other than Jesus, it revolved around people just like you and me, not super saints, but people who didn't have their act together, people who stumbled and fell, people who hurt other people with words or actions, who made mistakes and had to live with them, people who woke up each day, having to renew their trust in God for whatever the day would bring.

I'm convinced that Abraham, during those lonely long years of waiting for the promise made to him, wrestled with doubt, about God and the fulfillment of God's covenant with him.

Then there was Joseph, thrown into the pit in the middle of the desert and then sold into slavery. I can't imagine he was thanking God for that particular turn of events! When he was released and brought into Pharaoh's court, he may have whispered a quick prayer of thanksgiving for his deliverance, but when he was thrown back into jail on trumped-up charges, I find it hard to believe he said to himself, “Thanks, God, I'm really glad to be here.”

The same with all the heroes of the faith...Moses, when he fled the desert, didn't go there expecting a picnic. And Jonah, sitting in the belly of a big fish, wasn't real pleased with his surroundings. So, to spiritualize those saints of God, does damage to our own struggles, and our daily faith walk with God.

If we, you and I can't admit our fears, our doubts, our longings, the deep unanswered longings in our hearts, then Christianity is for fools and make-believe. If God is only the God of the good, the

happy, the prosperous, those for whom everything seems to be going right, the story of Jesus is a meaningless myth, simply a great story to tell.

Jesus walked the *same* roads we walk. He lived with the same pressures, the same pain, the same turmoil that we experience.

We thank God that Jesus didn't travel above the hurts. Jesus' feet got dirty. We know, because a woman washed his feet with her tears. Jesus got tired. We know that because of what he himself said about his ministry, "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of man has no where to lay his head."

Perhaps one of the reasons Jesus went to Jerusalem to die on a cross was to show us that when we stumble on our crosses, we aren't to run away, but to stay, and deal with our cross, to live through our agony, our brokenness, because we too have the hope of the resurrection. We have the promise given to us—that God's will is being worked out – even on the dark side of Friday.

Jesus isn't a genie. He didn't come just to give us what we wish for! He came to show us that when things happen we don't want to happen, we are to hang on, because that is not the last chapter. There is always that final chapter, that last sentence from God that often seems to be the cliffhanger. That's salvation history – that's the message from God.

Abraham and Sarah did have a son!  
Joseph saved Egypt, and then saved his family from starvation!  
Moses led his people out of bondage.  
Jonah went on to preach in Ninevah.  
Jesus not longer hangs on the old rugged cross.

And that's the point of scripture. That's why it's people, not just philosophies in the Bible. That's why Paul in his letter to the Romans could write, "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." The passage doesn't say, "All things are good," but that God works all things to God's good, to those who love God and who are called according to his purpose.

Now, being thrown in a hole in the middle of the desert isn't good, but through that whole experience, on the other side, there was a greater plan. And so, when you fall into the pit, when you feel you are falling apart, when you walk through the valley and the shadows—pray and wait for the Word.

In Romans 8 it says, "...to those who love God," that the Lord will use everything that happens in our lives to work together for our best interest. The tapestry of our lives isn't finished. We can only see the underside, with the knots, and the loose strings. But God has a much better vantage point to be able to see the finished project, complete, through Jesus.

Ingmar Bergman, a famous Swedish film maker, described a time in his career when his health was poor, and his spirits were low. He wrote, "I was about to lose my joy. I could feel it physically.

It was running out. I was just drying up inside. But then, he remembered that when Johann Sebastian Bach learned his wife and two of their children had died when he was away on a trip, he had written, "Dear Lord, may my joy, not leave."

Bergman commented that "All through my conscious life, I have lived with what Bach called 'his joy.' It carried me through crisis and misery, and functioned as faithfully as my heart. Sometimes overwhelming and difficult to handle, but never antagonistic or destructive." Bach called this state, his joy, "A joy in God."

To lose one's joy is to lose one's soul. Without the ability to connect with God and/or to believe that all things are working toward the good, we are left with only a wish-upon-a-star mentality and hope for the best kind of outlook.

But, with trust, and belief in God's sovereignty, we can say with the Apostle Paul, "All things work together for good," and we can trust God with our lives. May it be so for each of us.